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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TUNIS 000372

NOFORN
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STATE FOR NEA/MAG (NARDI AND HAYES)

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KCOR](#) [SOCI](#) [PREL](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: TUNISIAN CRITICIZES REGIME IN FORTHCOMING BOOK;
SHARES ANECDOTE OF BEN ALI CORRUPTION

REF: 07 TUNIS 1489

TUNIS 00000372 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX approached Ambassador and Pol/EconCouns XXXXXXXXXXXX to share with us XXXXXXXXXXXX the Ambassador gave him assurances that we would. XXXXXXXXXXXX shared a rare first-hand account of corruption from several years ago in which Ben Ali himself was described as asking for a 50 percent stake in XXXXXXXXXXXX private university. XXXXXXXXXXXX

XXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXX [BOOK TITLE REDACTED]

¶2. (C) On the margins of a networking event for aspiring and successful social entrepreneurs XXXXXXXXXXXX The book is extremely critical of the Ben Ali regime for, among other things, the "duality" between official discourse and the reality on the ground. Specifically XXXXXXXXXXXX points to the "stifling" of political liberties and "omnipotent" controls on the media. He also charges that freedom of association is "illusory" and assesses that "the rule of law is more fiction than reality." XXXXXXXXXXXX

XXXXXXXXXXXX

¶3. XXXXXXXXXXXX asked that the US Embassy follow his case XXXXXXXXXXXX; the Ambassador assured him that we would do so. Pol/EconCouns reviewed XXXXXXXXXXXX some of the accounts of life in prison that we have heard from released political prisoners; XXXXXXXXXXXX.

Tale of Corruption I:
The French Connection?

¶4. (C/NF) Asked whether he had also been in touch with other western embassies, XXXXXXXXXXXX said that he had not. He had avoided reaching out to the French, in particular, arguing that Ambassador Degallaix is seen as Ben Ali's Ambassador to French President Sarkozy, not vice versa. In addition, XXXXXXXXXXXX alleged that the GOT has improperly given Ambassador Degallaix a villa, which is registered in his daughter's name, on rue Sidi Dhrif, near the President's own residence. He did not offer any evidence of this alleged corruption or explain how this knowledge came to him.

XXXXXXXXXXXX

Tale of Corruption II:
Ben Ali Seeks 50 Percent Stake XXXXXXXXXXXX

¶5. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX likened corruption to a dangerous cancer that is spreading in Tunisia, spurred on by the corrupt practices of President Ben Ali and his extended family. When Pol/EconCouns responded by noting that most tales of corruption that we hear concern "The Family" rather than the President himself, XXXXXXXXXXXX recounted an incident in which Ben Ali himself was involved. XXXXXXXXXXXX Ben Ali came off as "very uneducated" in the meeting, failing to grasp some of the key points XXXXXXXXXXXX about the virtues XXXXXXXXXXXX Ben Ali abruptly told him that he wanted a 50-50 stake in the enterprise. Fearful of responding in the negative, XXXXXXXXXXXX said he "played dumb," pretending not to understand the President's proposition.

Other Run-ins with "The Family"

¶6. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX also reviewed the difficulties that lead to the closure XXXXXXXXXXXX

How Suha Arafat Got Into Trouble

¶7. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX also offered a theory as to what was behind the GOT's decision to revoke Suha Arafat's Tunisian citizenship in 2007. (Note: Reftel also reports on this incident.) He said that he had heard that Leila Ben Ali at that time had been scheming to marry off an 18 year-old niece (NFI) to UAE Prime Minister and Dubai Ruler Sheik Mohamed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, one of whose wives is the half-sister of the King of Jordan. According to this rumor, Suha Arafat warned Jordanian Queen Rania about Leila Ben Ali's plans. Word of Arafat's intervention got back to the Tunisian First Lady, who turned against Arafat and soon forced her out of Tunisia.

XXXXXXXXXXXX

¶8. XXXXXXXXXXXX

XXXXXXXXXXXX

¶9. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX is extremely well respected and considered an upstanding member of the community. While we might doubt the veracity of some of the rumors that he shared with us, we have no reason to doubt his account of his conversation with President Ben Ali, in which he described the President as seeking a 50 percent stake in his private university. We routinely hear allegations of corruption, and such allegations are inherently difficult to prove. XXXXXXXXXXXX anecdote strikes us as credible. It is also significant in that it implicates Ben Ali himself, while so many other reported incidents of corruption involve his extended family.

¶10. XXXXXXXXXXXX

Please visit Embassy Tunis' Classified Website at:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/tunis/index.cfm>
Godec